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Mnemonic Waters

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BY

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Abstract

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Mnemonic Waters is a body of work that explores elements of memory, personal mythology, and storytelling. Through the photographic process of wet plate collodion, images from the artist's archive are used to visually re-interpret vivid memory narratives gathered from other individuals through an interview process. Personal mythology is a belief system created from the stories that make up autobiographical memory. The perspective of our memories evolve as we do and it is through the process of storytelling that an individual gives meaning and makes sense of past events in relation to the present and in anticipation of the future. The final pieces are intimate glass sculptures containing narratives of surreal imagery. *Mnemonic Waters* incorporates traditional mythology, the psychology of memory, ideas of the archive, and embraces the connections formed between people from the cyclical process of storytelling.

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Installation View of *Mnemonic Waters* at the William Harris Gallery 2015, Rochester, New York

Installation Detail of *Mnemonic Waters* at the William Harris Gallery, 2015, Rochester, New York

Pools and Cyclones, Installation Detail of *Mnemonic Waters* at the William Harris Gallery, 2015, Rochester, New York

Never Would Have Known
3 in x 4 1/2 in x 2 1/2 in

A little fire, put it out. A little fire, put it out.

5 in x 7 in x 2 1/2 in

Flavored with the scent of chlorine

3 in x 5 in x 2 1/2 in

Close my eyes
3 in x 3 1/2 in x 1 1/2 in

Hear the coo-coo clocks

3 in x 4 in x 1 1/2 in

All the lumber in a box car

6 in x 4 in x 2 in

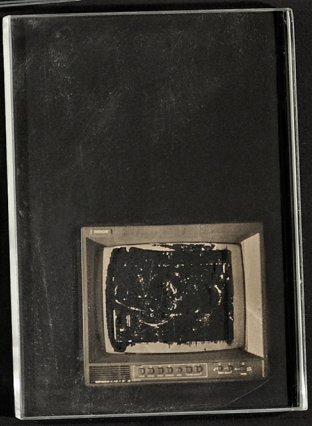
At 12,000 feet
4 in x 6 in x 2 in

Tiptoe and jump
3 in x 6 in x 2 1/2 in

Untitled

3 in x 4 in each






Artist Statement

> *"Imagining the constellations did not of course change the stars, nor did it change the black emptiness that surrounds them. What is changed was the way people read the night sky."*[1]
>
> -John Berger

There is a mythmaker in all of us that composes our memories into the ephemeral ballad we use to define ourselves. Much like traditional myths guide entire cultures, personal mythology creates meaning and a sense of connection for the individual. My interest lies in the stories taken from autobiographical memory that make up a personal mythology. In this body of work I explore how these stories become a part of a belief system and how the process of storytelling creates a connection between people. How does the perspective of a past event impact how we understand ourselves? What does it mean to share our personal myths with others? Influenced by the power of storytelling, imagination, sensory experience, and connectedness, *Mnemonic Waters* visually translates vivid memories into tangible narratives. Like a storyteller, I collect, remake, and pass on what has been shared with me.

Traditional myths were created to give meaning and roles for the individuals within a group. They were a belief system that explained the unexplainable. Due to the awareness of our own temporality, humans are compelled to have our experiences acknowledged. We seek assurance of our own existence and sharing our personal mythology is a way to pass on experiences and events. Personal mythology is a set of beliefs, feelings, and rules that interpret experiences, create explanations, and give direction to our behavior.[2] Along with biological and cultural influences, personal mythology is constructed from autobiographical memory—our life

story. These myths reinforce the sense of self by remembering the past, giving order to the present, and helping to envision the future. By reinforcing personal experiences through storytelling, we are able to create our own mythology. By sharing these stories, a connection is made between the teller and the audience. My curiosity of the deeper implication behind the stories we tell fuels my interest in this project.

Most of the pieces from this body of work begin with a request. I ask other individuals to share a vivid memory with me and a story begins to unfold. Vivid memories are the foundation of life stories and are based on novel, consequential, emotional, or symbolic events. They evolve as we do and are the beginnings from which our autobiographical memory system forms.[3] The old view of memory is that every experience is stored accurately in the brain and remembering is just a matter of retrieval. The current view of memory is that rather than being recovered, our memories are actually re-created. Memories are fluid and have open spaces that we naturally fill with meaning to create a whole, cohesive understanding of the memory. These constructions are often generalizations based on the way we feel about the event.[4] So the importance of the memory does not lie in the accuracy to the past event, but in the personal interpretation of it. Just because a memory is not accurate, does not mean it is not true for the individual.

When possible, I take voice recordings of the stories being shared with me. I sometimes ask sensory questions along the way, hoping that remembering the smell, feel, or sound may elicit more detail of the memory from the teller. It is storytelling that allows us to fill the voids in memory and to give meaning to the experience. We have two opposing characters in charge of our autobiographical memory system. Each of us has a librarian, who is the keeper of our memory archives and wants to know the true event. Then there is the

mythmaker. The mythmaker seeks the truth about the self, and answers the question 'who am I?'[5] It is the mythmaker that creates meaning between otherwise random strings of events. In the re-creation of our memories, we become the authors of our own personal mythologies.

The photographs used in these pieces are from my archive and serve to visually re-create key ideas and elements from the stories that are shared with me. The photographs are from my travels, time spent with family and friends, and the random snapshots that have accrued over the years. My archive prevents forgetfulness and serves as proof that those events did happen. I was there. The idea of the archive itself can be closely related to how we approach memory. There is a sense of value, significance, and authority in both. The archive preserves information, but at the same time allows for interpretation of meaning in relation to the present by connecting individual bits of information to each other.[6] Just like memories, we select, re-create, and respond to the stored information and the resulting meaning is largely a reflection of ourselves. I see my photographs as a vocabulary that I can arrange and synthesize into complete verses. Through this act of composing I become a visual storyteller of images that straddle the real and the imagined. The use of the photographic image incorporates a sense of authenticity through the association to a real place and time. As Roland Barthes insisted, "*the thing has been there.*"[7] However, the juxtaposition of contextually unrelated images creates a new landscape, an unconstrained perspective, and an ambiguous space that is open to interpretation.

Aby Warburg viewed his colossal project *Mnemosyne Atlas* as the art of the in-between.[8] Chosen from his collection of over 60,000 books, Warburg created new stories by associating before unrelated images taken from the context of cosmology, art history,

contemporary images from magazines and newspapers, and his own personal life. He forged intuitively and gave new meaning to our history's visual memory through his intimate perspective of the potential relationships between these images. Curiously enough, this project never fully existed. Warburg died before he could complete it and the original panels were lost. All that exists today is the documentation of the process: 79 photographs taken of the panels. All that exists is the *process* of creating meaning.

How to tell a story is something that is learned. From childhood we begin to understand the ideas of linear sequencing, of character, setting, and plot from the stories that were told to us. Collections of short stories, from Edgar Allen Poe to the brothers Grimm, were present within my childhood library. As an adult I became interested in visual stories such as the ones from the traditional Japanese woodblock prints of Ukiyo-e. Ukiyo-e is often translated as "Floating World." It flourished during a time and place where the ruling class of Japan turned a blind eye to the merchant class. In this regards, Edo, the present-day city of Tokyo, was perceived as unreal—a realm of fantasy that existed outside of reality, or the law.[9] The images served as illustrations for well-know stories and people. The Ukiyo-e masters Hiroshige and Yoshitoshi's usage of perspective, negative space, motion, and color to illustrate a tale helped me form my own visual language.

Traditional myths are the oldest stories that help us begin to structure our own stories. Sacred stories are used as a template for the construction of our own mundane ones.[10] For some of the memory-narratives, I incorporate related imagery and symbolism from our larger mythologies. The composition and imagery of *Never would have known* is informed by the Persian legend of King Kay Kaus and his ill-fated attempt at flight. With pieces of meat dangling at the top of a throne and ravenous eagles chained to the

feet, the king was lifted into the sky. But like the moral of many world myths dealing with man and flight, tragedy comes from mimicking the powers of the gods.[11] By layering elements from traditional myths with personal myth, individual stories become connected to our collective culture.

It is imagination that separates the *mythmaker* from the *librarian* of our memory archives. A strong imagination is needed to create and understand the metaphors in a narration. An individual can create meaning in the metaphor, can add color and texture, and can see cause and influence in our experiences. It is important to understand the deeper meanings and those meanings need to stay relevant to the time, culture, and individuals they impact. A good story will have direction and motion.[12] Expressing personal narratives through visual art allows for more ambiguous metaphors and freedom to build a personal myth. We are adding with more intention specific metaphors to the storyline and obscuring the presence of facts of the past event. Ambiguous narratives and surreal imagery are used in this body of work to engage the viewer. There is a freedom of personal interpretation, and the surreal scenes offer a chance to explore uncharted environments. A viewer may enter the work through the promise of some narrative, but the journey through this narrative lies in his or her own imagination. In this way, the work aims to create a space for the viewer to be both audience and storyteller of their own visual journey.

The desire to inspire imaginative journeys in others was the goal of visual artist Joseph Cornell. He thought of his collage shadow boxes as 'poetic theaters,' themed with the ideas, memories, dreams and fantasies of the inner self. His work was motivated by creativity and curiosity. Cornell incorporated different mediums of craft such as woodworking, painting, papering, and drawing. He valued the intuitive process of making and creating something new out of the

seemingly ordinary. As much of *Mnemonic Waters* is process heavy, I can relate to this intuitive process of making. There is a meditative quality to working with my hands and exploring different materials in order to create a visual idea.

Comparable to the fluidity and weight, and the voids and layers of memory, glass is used as the substrate for the imagery in this body of work. Layered like the telling and retelling of a story, the implication of passing time, and the changing perspective of memory, individual glass layers separate the images—the elements of the event—and when joined in their totality they are given a single meaning. The transparent emptiness between the floating images enables light not only to pass through, but also to be held within the watery glass. Due to the nature of the photographic process, wet plate collodion, the imagery itself only emerges when placed against darkness. Wet plate collodion on glass, or ambrotypes, are simultaneously a positive and a negative image. The relationship between the viewer, the piece, and the environment controls this perspective. When viewed against the light, the image appears as a negative, and when viewed against darkness it becomes a positive. The imagery is only communicated through a necessary partnership of light and darkness. This photographic process is also used for its inherent qualities that compliment the ethereality of memory. Subtle visual anomalies arise from any disturbance with the chemistry, leaving ghostly traces and marks across the surface just as the perception of our own memories is affected by the continuous layering of new experiences. Even though the original image has been pulled from a digital archive, the final image on each layer is an original print. In this way, there is a play between the ideas of authenticity and re-creation that is similar to how we reconstruct our own memories.

Storytelling is an interactive process of communication. The

storyteller relays the information of a story to the audience, and in their own mind the audience creates a visual understanding of the information being received. Once the entirety of the information is acquired, the audience is then free to become the storyteller themselves. The process of storytelling invites all into its cyclical rhythm to participate as teller, character, and audience in turn. The sculptures in this body of work are created from the memories of other individuals that are close to me—my family, friends, and people in my everyday life. It is the connection that forms between people through the storytelling process that attracts me. It is a way for me to hold onto the authenticity of the connections I have made.

The titles of the sculptures are fragments of statements extracted from the original stories. In this way a reference is made back to the original context of the story through the words of the original storyteller. These fragments of phrases walk the line of specificity and ambiguity. They hint that the narratives come from an authentic origin, but what that origin may be is left for the viewer to decipher.

The interactive piece in the exhibition *Mnemonic Waters* switches the roles of the storyteller and audience. Unlike the sculptures created from other individuals' memories, the stackable piece is composed of images representing elements from one of my memories. The layers are left separate and free to encourage the viewer to arrange and compose their own visual translation. The viewer is now the storyteller who interprets and retells an episode from my personal mythology. In this sharing of personal stories an understanding and connection are formed between the storyteller and the audience. However, there is also a vulnerability to exposing the personal, inner self. This is reflected in the small scrapes and scratches that have appeared on the surfaces of the small glass plates.

The work and installation style of Yamamoto Masau inspired the installation layout and viewer experience for *Mnemonic Waters*. Just as Yamamoto arranged and clustered his photographs to encourage the viewer to create their own narrative, the installation layout for *Mnemonic Waters* invites a viewer to walk among the narratives in their totality, while encountering each narrative independently. Like constellations or mountain peaks, the sculptures are individually illuminated and placed in an organic rhythm within a dark space, creating an environment that promotes curiosity, discovery, and investigation. There is an association with the body and memory, which is encouraged in the installation by allowing the viewer to physically experience the space. This is done by exhibiting the narratives on pedestals that are a bit too high, or a bit too low, or hiding behind each other so that the viewer's body moves accordingly in order to examine them. In addition, due to the visual nature of ambrotypes, the perception of the object is dependent upon the relationship between the viewer, the piece, and what is beyond the piece. By placing the sculptures within a plateaued landscape, as the viewer moves around and between the pieces, the appearance and visual impression of each piece transforms simultaneously with this movement.

Through the storytelling process in this body of work, personal myths are drawn out from the inner self and given a place in the physical world. Material objects serve as surrogate souvenirs of the event. The final piece is a complete narrative held within a unit of glass. Although the process of this body of work is about the linear narrative and cyclical process of storytelling, the final pieces function more as a poem would. They are not about the parts of the visual vocabulary, but the sum of these relationships. Once meaning has been given to an experience through the story, we are free to behold the memory in its totality. The dormant story is a poem that floats in our minds like miso soup. It pays homage to the essence of

the experience, and it is the essence that moves us. It absorbs the directions of time into one infinite mass and absolves Past, Present, and Future from limitation. It frees our experiences, and ourselves, from temporality. It is the poem that will make tangible our experiences.

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[1] John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984) 8.

[2] David Feinstein, "Personal Mythology and Psychotherapy: Myth-making in Psychological and Spiritual Development," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 67 (1997): 510.

[3] John Kotre, *White Gloves: How We Create Ourselves Through Memory*, (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 93-99.

[4] Ibid., 33.

[5] Ibid., 116-17.

[6] Sue Breakell, "Perspectives: Negotiating the Archive," *Tate Papers* 9 (2008): 3. http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/perspectives-negotiating-archive.

[7] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 76.

[8] Brian Dillon, "Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas," *Frieze Magazine* 80 (2004), http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/collected_works/.

[9] Sandy Kita, *The Floating World of Ukiyo-e: Shadows, Dreams, and Substance*, (New York: Abrams in association with the Library of Congress, 2001), 35.

[10] Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," in *Memory, Identity, Community: The Idea of Narrative in the Human Sciences*, ed. Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 32.

[11] Louis Herbert Gray, George Foot Moore, and John Arnott MacCulloch, eds., *The Mythology of All Races*, (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1917), 336. Google eBook edition.

[12] Gustavo Beck, "Epic Fathering: Homer's Odyssey as Healer of the Puer-Senex Split and Restorer of Mythic Movement," *Mythological Studies Journal* 1 (2010). http://journals.sfu.ca/pgi/index.php/pacificamyth/article/view/17/52